

Two Decades of RAP...

By Ron Wilson

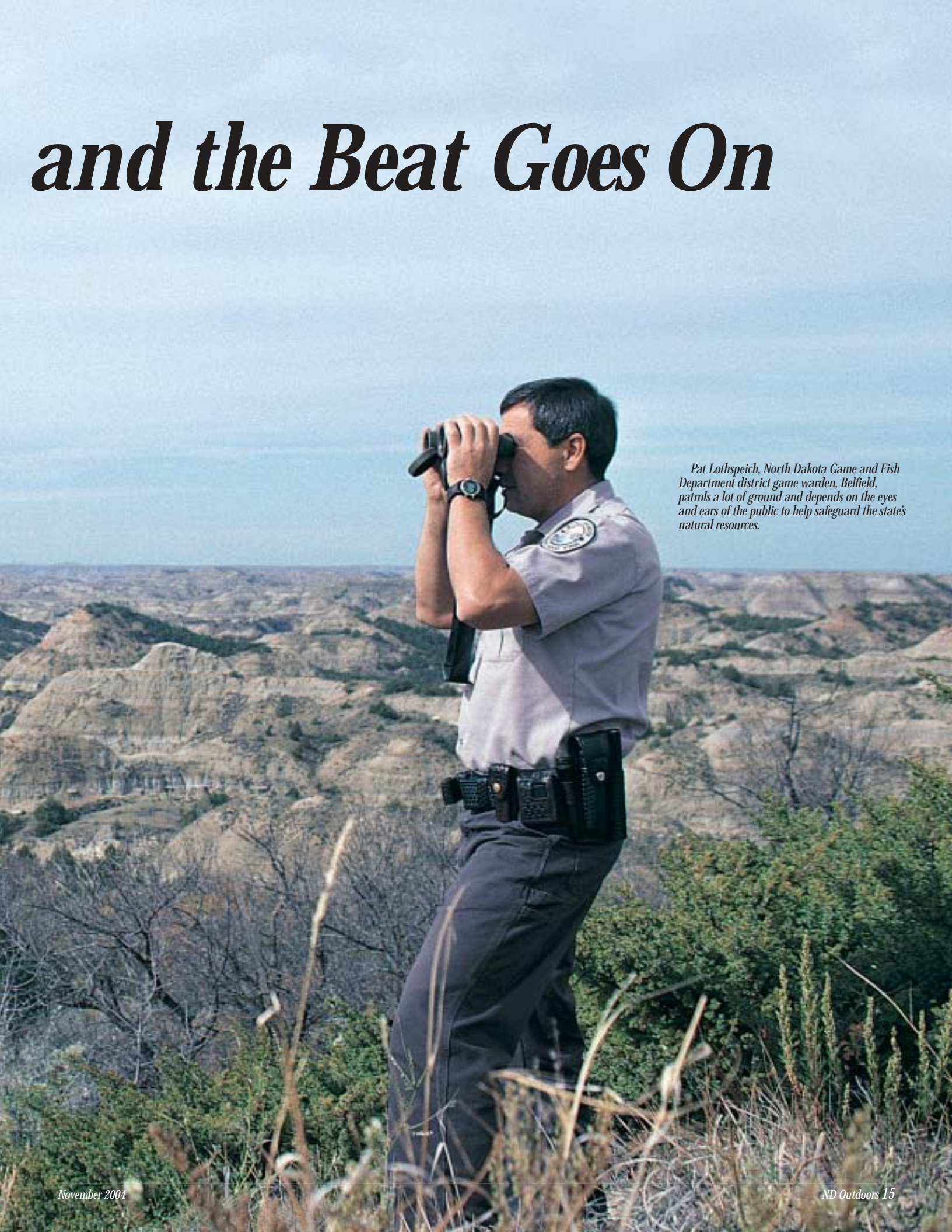
It's big country, nearly three counties worth. Most of it is up and down badlands terrain that takes your breath away – as much for its beauty as for its leg-burning ruggedness. It's Pat Lothspeich's beat, more than 2,000 square miles of it, and like other North Dakota Game and Fish Department district game wardens with miles and miles to patrol, he can't be everywhere at once.

That's where Report All Poachers, a program that provides people the opportunity to report game and fish violations, comes in. With fewer than 35 game wardens in North Dakota, the public's involvement in safeguarding the state's natural resources is paramount.

"When I do get a RAP call, it's generally a good one," said Lothspeich, who headquarters out of Belfield. "Every hunter and angler out there has a duty to report things. They need to take a personal stake in their natural resources."



and the Beat Goes On



Pat Lothspeich, North Dakota Game and Fish Department district game warden, Belfield, patrols a lot of ground and depends on the eyes and ears of the public to help safeguard the state's natural resources.

RAP

, a cooperative project of the North Dakota Wildlife Federation, Game and Fish, and North Dakota State Radio Communications Department, is 20 this year. The RAP program seed was planted in 1982 at a meeting in Devils Lake, but it didn't officially get its start until two years later when rewards were given to callers whose information led to convictions.

"More people over the years have said 'no' to the rewards than those who wanted the money," said Lorne Sterner, RAP committee chairman for the program's first 15 years. "They figured they were doing a good deed to wildlife and didn't feel they needed to be paid for it."

That first year, 35 successful RAP cases resulted in 57 violations, according to the program's 1984 activity summary. "What RAP has done, I think, is let people know that it's OK to make the call ... to turn someone in," Sterner said. "I had to make a RAP call and it turned into a conviction, but I did not ask for a reward."

What happened was Sterner witnessed someone driving off-trail during the deer

gun season, warned the offender twice before calling State Radio at 800-472-2121. "Just having the RAP program out there and people knowing that someone may be watching, has kept some people in check," he said.

But not all.

In 1998, a RAP call led Lothspeich to a poacher who shot a big mule deer buck on private property. "That was a classic case of some hunters seeing something that wasn't right, not kosher, so they did something about it and made the call," he said. "I booked to the scene as quickly as I could after getting the call. After I learned the facts from talking to the informants and looked at the situation, I knew who shot the animal."

Later, in a RAP complaint memorandum, Lothspeich wrote: "I had four hunters who took several hours off from their hunt to report and cooperate with me on a very good case. I was hoping that each of the four informants could receive \$100 each for the information they provided in order to resolve this case in a guilty plea."

The poacher, by the way, was fined \$250 for failure to tag a big game animal; fined \$50 for shooting from a motor vehicle; paid \$450 in restitution for shooting the buck, with the money going to the RAP program; and had to forfeit his rifle and scope, estimated at about \$400, with the proceeds also going to RAP.

The success of RAP after two decades can't be measured just by the number of rewards given out, said Robert Timian, Department enforcement division chief. Nor can the program be measured by the number of RAP calls relayed to wardens, as many, by request of the callers, are not designated as "official" RAP calls. "People aren't reporting violations to make money, but we also don't want to make those people feel bad who ask for a reward because that's what it's there for," he said. "What's important is the awareness the program has raised. I don't think you can overstate the importance of the public taking interest in their resources."

Photo Omitted.

RAP at 20

Report All Poachers in North Dakota turned 20 years old this year. You can help the RAP program by contributing to the reward fund. Send donations to: RAP, 1347, 3rd Ave. NW, Valley City, ND 58072.

RAP rewards are funded by donations from the public, organizations and money garnered from auctioning off confiscated guns, vehicles and other equipment as ordered in criminal judgments.

Note to poachers: You just never know when you're being watched. "During the pheasant opener, for example, we might have 60,000 hunters in the field ... That's a lot of eyes keeping tabs on what is going on," Timian said.

Witnesses to violations aren't necessarily strangers perched on a hill somewhere looking through binoculars. "We've had family members turn in family members and hunting partners turn in hunting partners," Sterner said. "I think RAP has made better sportsmen out of some people."

One of the poacher's worst enemies – and RAP's best friend – is the cell phone. Just about everyone carries one nowadays, allowing for mischievous behavior in the field to be reported immediately. Narrowing the time between the incident and when the game warden can gather evidence helps to make a good case. "In the past, people kind of mulled it over and waited three or four days before calling it in," Timian said. "The warden still might be able to make a case in that instance, but it's much more difficult, as the evidence has disappeared and people have certainly left the scene."

It was during North Dakota's deer gun season when Lothspeich handled a cell phone to cell phone call from hunters who watched as some individuals shot at bighorn sheep. "It was happening right in front of them and they're fired up, giving me a blow by blow account over the phone as I'm flying down the road to get to the scene," he said.

The shooters supposedly mistook – despite good light conditions and having a spotting scope and binoculars – the bighorns for mule deer. A ewe was killed. "Because of the information I was getting over the cell phone, I arrived on the scene knowing who did the shooting, who was driving, who was the passenger, what color their boots were ..." Lothspeich said. "It was like I was at the scene the entire time. When I arrived with what I already knew, they couldn't snow the snowman."

At every opportunity, Lothspeich spreads the RAP gospel by passing out cards, brochures, calendars, pens and pencils that feature the RAP phone number. "I tell them to give the number a call if there is something I, or any other game warden, should know about," he said. "It's a little personal promotion that works, I think."

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.

How to RAP

- If you have information or witness a game and fish violation, call 800-472-2121. Your phone call can be made from anywhere in North Dakota, 24 hours a day. You can also call any North Dakota Game and Fish Department district game warden, sheriff's office or U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service office or refuge.
- If you wish to remain anonymous, but would like to be eligible for a Report All Poachers reward, you will be given a special code number and a phone number to call down the road. If the information you've provided leads to a conviction, arrangements for a reward will be made.
- The successful completion of a case is enhanced, however, if you're willing to talk to a game warden to provide clarification or more information. In this instance, your identity can still be kept confidential.



CRAIG BIHRLE

RAP calls, over the years, have led to the apprehension of many poachers and confiscation of illegally taken game.

Pen to Paper

If you see a game and fish violation, remember to write down:

- Nature of violation.
- Date and time of offense.
- Violator's name and address if known.
- Vehicle description.
- Description of violator's age, build, clothing, and other features.
- Location of violation.
- Your name, address and phone number.
- Name, addresses and phone numbers of other witnesses.